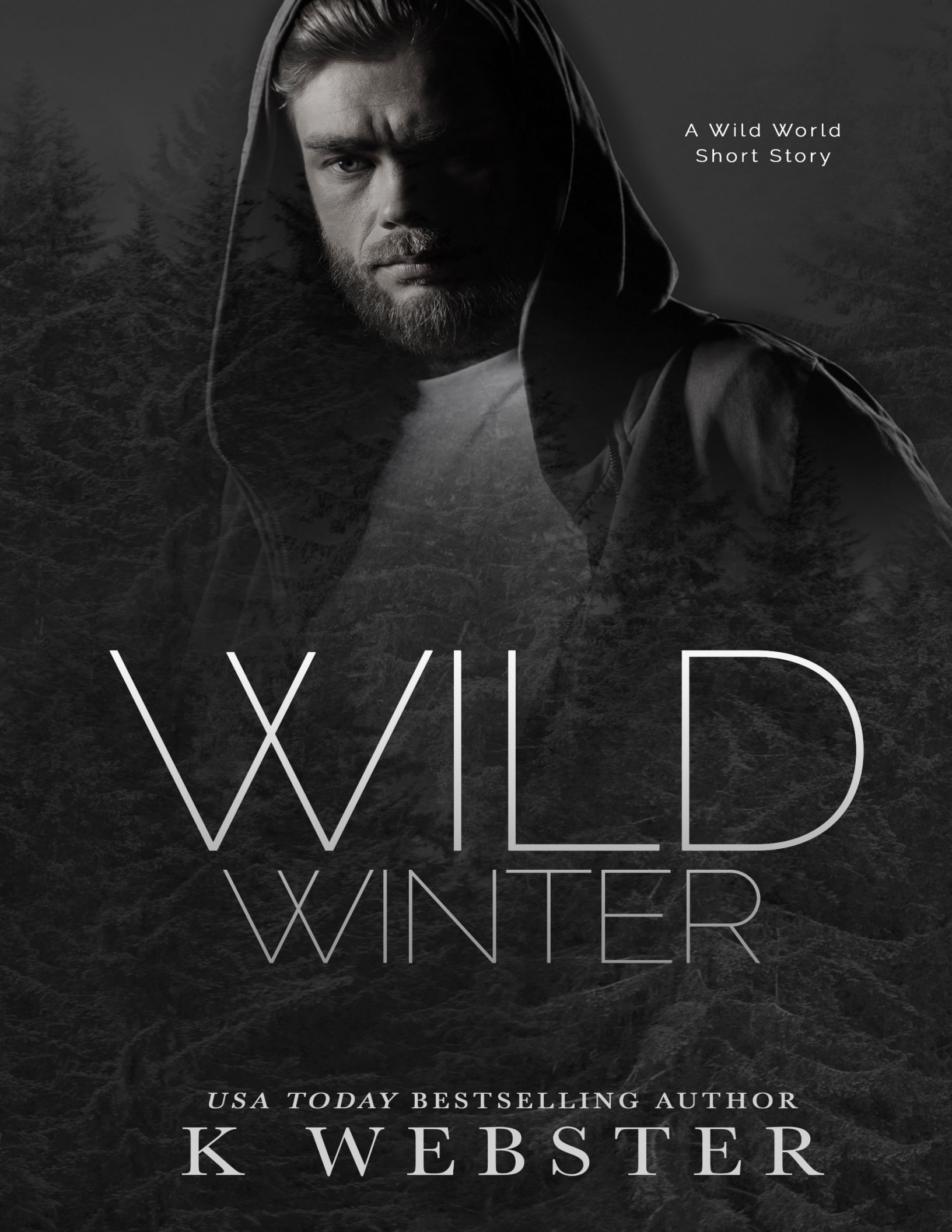
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Short Story
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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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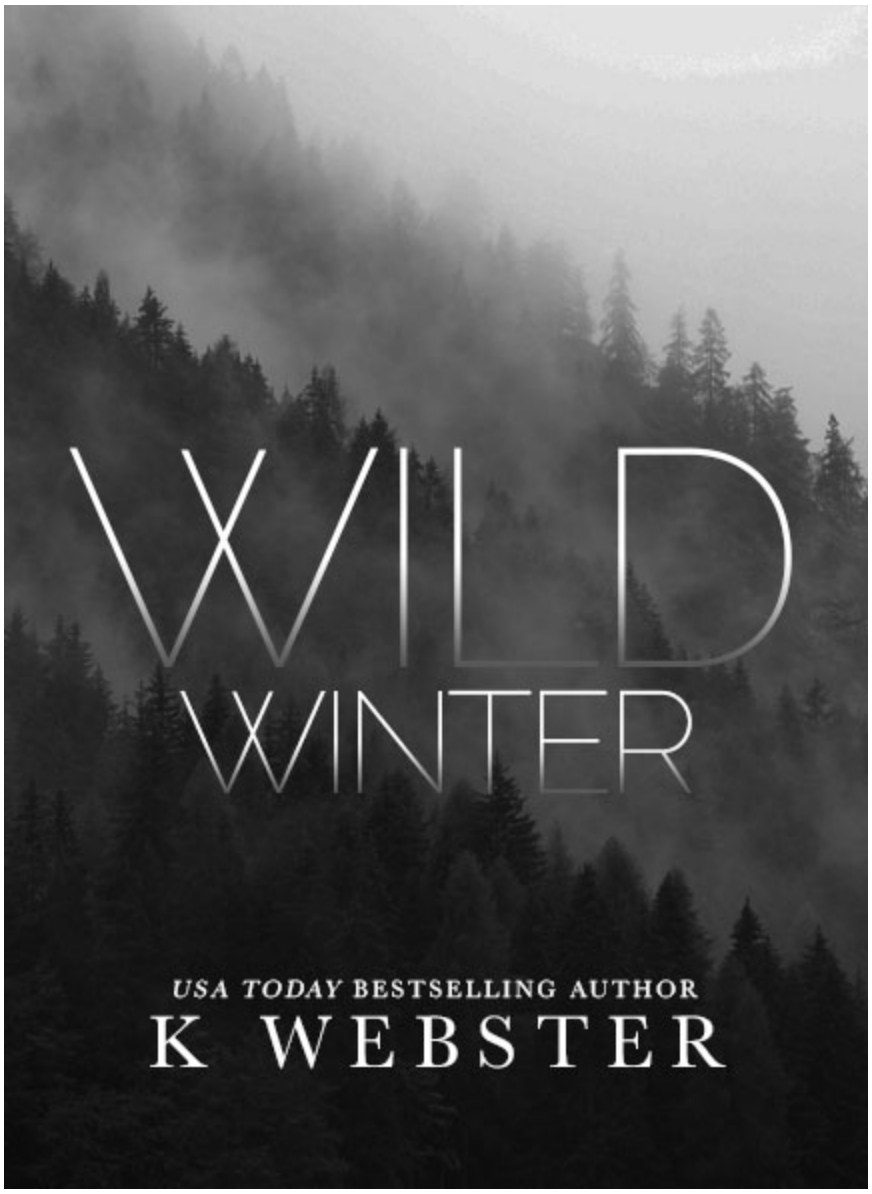
WILD
WINTER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
K WEBSTER

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Home is where I’m the safest.
Away from people, the world, my awful mistakes.

But I can’t hide forever.
A broken part of my past comes to visit, and I’m forced to face it.
The snow, a cruel enemy, makes sure I have nowhere to run.

My emotions are a mess. Confusing thoughts make things worse. There’s only so long I can keep all this pain bottled up inside of me.

Loneliness and desire dictate my next move.
I’m probably ruining everything…again.
There’s no escaping it this time.

It’s going to be a wild winter.

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NOTE TO READER

The prologue of *Wild Winter* was included at the back of the *Wild + Free Collector's Edition* as a bonus story. Not everyone read that little snippet, so I included it in *Wild Winter* as it gives context to Rowdy's past. *Wild Winter* is meant to be a bridge novella similar to *Daddy Reed*. It will prepare you for Rowdy's full story which ***WILL*** be taboo and ***WON'T*** be safe for Amazon.

Wild World Reading Order:
The Wild
The Free
Daddy Reed
The Untamed
The Unruly
Wild Winter
More to come!

WILD WINTER TRIGGER WARNING:

References to past rape/sexual assault (including a flashback), drug abuse, and miscarriage. There is also a self-harm/attempted suicide scene. Please read with caution.

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PROLOGUE

wild

The Past (Thirteen Years Old)

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor," Momma says from the kitchen.

I stick my tongue out at her even though she can't see but stop my pacing by the front window. Evan laughs from the sofa. Turning his way, I glower at him. He holds my glare with an amused one until I look away.

Rowdy's coming to visit. Dad went to get him yesterday and will arrive this evening. I'm excited to see my favorite cousin. Not my real cousin, but we pretend. We haven't seen them in six months. With Momma being pregnant again, Dad doesn't want her traveling. He's afraid the stress will make her miscarry.

Again.

I'm becoming immune to her losses.

She's lost three and I remember each one clearly. Momma cried and cried for days. The first one, I was really sad. I cuddled up to Momma in bed and tried to make her feel better. The second one, I was just ready for her to stop being sad. And by the third, I was slightly annoyed. Of course I never told her that.

Now she's pregnant with twins. A boy and a girl, the doctor says. It'll be two more we'll bury beneath the tree out back. I don't tell Momma that, though. I let her hope even though hope is a waste of energy.

"Come sit down," Evan says. "You're making me tired."

Evan hides behind his jokes and smiles, but he's a miserable man. He got canned at his job for smoking pot in the bathroom. Grandma lost her shit over that. Uncle Will said he couldn't move back in with him. I think it's because Uncle Will is married to some young college girl and he thinks his son will steal her from his old ass.

I snort at that thought.

I wonder how Uncle Will would feel if he knew his son liked guys instead.

Knowing him, he'd lose it. Uncle Will likes things in order and if they're not, he makes them that way.

"Yo, earth to Wild."

I flip Evan off. He lives with us now. Dad hates it. I know he hates it, but he'd never turn down family. But it was after a fight with Evan the other day that he said he was going to go pick Rowdy up. Last time he'd been out there, Uncle Reed spoke to him about letting Rowdy come for a visit soon. He craves a taste of the city life, he'd said.

"Why are you so antsy anyway?" Evan asks. "It's just Rowdy."

Just Rowdy.

Rowdy was never just anything.

He's funny and crazy and caring. When Ryder's being a little shit, Rowdy puts him in his place. When Ronan is worrying over stupid stuff, Rowdy calms his fears. And when Raegan or one of the other kids is being a big-ass whiner, he tickles them just to make them smile.

I hate that they all use him.

No one is there for Rowdy.

Except me.

On rare occasions, he tells me things. Things that bother him or upset him or anger him. I listen because I like the way his voice sounds. I like the way his mouth moves. I like the way his overgrown blond hair hangs in his blue eyes, and he flicks his head back to get the strands to move.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you love your cousin," Evan taunts.

"Fuck you," I snap.

A little too loudly, apparently.

Momma comes flying out of the kitchen with a wooden spoon in hand. Her belly may be huge now that she's pregnant and I may be taller than her, but she's scary sometimes.

"Did you just curse?"

I glower at her. "It was Evan."

Evan snorts. "Yeah, it was me. I'm the bad guy, Eve."

Momma taps me on the head with the spoon before kissing my forehead. "Be a good boy."

As soon as she's gone, I huff.

“You’re welcome,” Evan says. “Now come sit with me already.”

Grumbling, I stomp over to the couch and plop down. Evan playfully punches my thigh. I swat him away. Sometimes he says stuff that makes me want to stab him in his damn eye.

“You’ve got an evil face going on right now, Wild.” Evan smirks.

I study his eyes. They’re dilated. Evan’s fucked up on something. Like always. How Momma and Dad don’t see is beyond me. If Uncle Will knew his son was such a loser, he’d probably happily haul his ass off to jail.

“Aww,” Evan taunts. “I hurt baby Wild’s feelers.”

He pulls me to him and clutches me with an iron grip. I rage and snarl, kicking out of his hold. It pisses me off when he likes to prove what a badass he is. If I were in my thirties too, I’d be able to hold down some kid. One day, I’ll be bigger, and he’ll regret this shit.

I break my arm free and elbow him in the throat. He shoves me to the floor and clutches his neck, fire gleaming in his eyes.

“Don’t be an ass,” he hisses.

Me?

I’m about to tell him to go to hell when the front door opens. Our new dog, Neb, bounds into the house, heading straight for me. When we lost BB to old age a few years ago, none of us could get over the loss. But then, one day last winter, we came across a Chow-Chow missing an ear. He was scrawny and alone. Dad called him No Ear Bear. Momma shortened it to Neb. He’s been our boy ever since.

“Hey, boy,” I greet, smiling as Neb happily licks my face.

Evan has lost his scowl. His eyes are wide and assessing. I follow his gaze to Dad and him. Rowdy. He’s taller than I remember, standing every bit as tall as Dad. Not as big, but one day he’ll get there.

I burst to my feet and rush over to them. He laughs when I nearly knock him over with a hug. Rowdy smells like fire and wilderness. He smells like a life I’m not allowed to live. I’m trapped here with Momma and Dad. I have to go to school and play football. I have to go to bed by nine and do dumb chores.

Rowdy gets to hunt and build cool shit. He doesn’t have to go to school or do dumb stuff like I do. His life is amazing. One day, I’m going to leave my house and go live with Uncle Reed and Aunt Devon so I can see Rowdy every day. Maybe I can smell like fire and wilderness too.

“Oh, hi,” Rowdy says, his voice deep. At almost eighteen, he’s practically a man now. “Evan? I haven’t seen you since…”

“Since you were five?” Evan’s annoying voice says from behind me.

“Son, you want to help me unload the truck?” Dad asks. He poses it like an option. I know I don’t have one.

“Yeah,” I grumble as I break from Rowdy’s arms.

“Good seeing you, man,” Evan says, pulling Rowdy in for a hug.

I’ve never wanted to punch Evan more than I want to in this moment.

They’re both around the same height. Evan hugs him for a moment too long. Just when I think I might have to pry him off Rowdy, Evan releases him. He stands close, his hand resting on Rowdy’s shoulder.

Rowdy, sometimes shy, turns red and wears a stupid smile.

I don’t like that smile.

“Evan,” I growl. “Make yourself useful and go help Dad.”

Evan snaps his head my way and glares at me. “It won’t be my ass that gets whipped if I don’t go out there. Run along, kid.”

Fury burns hot in my veins. I want to grab my pocketknife and stab him a thousand times. When Rowdy sees my murderous glare, he swoops in to save the day. That’s what Rowdy does. He saves everyone.

“I’ll help you,” he says. “Tell me about football. How’s it going?”

I hate football.

Hate it with every fiber of my being.

But tonight, I love it because it makes Evan scowl and I get Rowdy’s attention back on me. I grab his hand and drag him outside as I babble about my teammates and the last game we had. Dad smiles at us as he carries a couple of his guns. Rowdy and I make it to the back of the truck, and I can’t help but hug him again.

He’s my best friend.

“I missed you.” I look up at his smiling face and push his messy hair back. “Your hair is long. You gonna get Momma to cut it?”

He smirks. “I’m growing it out.”

“Like our dads?” I make a sour face. Dad is the only man I know besides Uncle Reed and Grandpa who has long hair. It’s weird. Who wants hair like a girl?

“Yeah,” he says, grinning. “It’s almost long enough for a man bun.” He runs his fingers through his dark blond hair and pulls it back to prove it to me. In the moonlight, with his hair away from his face, I can see the sharp

angle of his jaw. I have to fist my hand so I don’t do something stupid like run my finger along the bone.

“Girl,” I tease.

He flinches and scowls. It takes me half a second to realize I hurt his feelings. Instead of playfully laughing it off like usual, he grabs a box and storms away. I’m left with my mouth hanging open. Dad arrives a moment later.

“You okay, Wild?”

“I think Rowdy is mad at me.”

Dad looks over his shoulder and then ruffles my hair. “Give Rowdy some space. He’s going through a rough time. Uncle Reed wants me to look after him and show him town life.”

“Why is he having a rough time?” I demand.

Dad shrugs. “Don’t know. Life in the wilderness wasn’t for your mother either. Maybe Rowdy will get a taste of this life and decide to stay.”

The thought confuses me.

In every dream I have, I leave here to go be with my best friend. To spend every waking minute with him. We’ll hunt and fish and climb trees. We’ll stay up late talking. We’ll be together.

Him here is not a part of the plan.

I’m supposed to escape to him, not the other way around.

“I’ll make it better. I promise, Dad.”

Dad shakes his head. “Space, Wild. Give him some space.”

I gave him space.

And he ignored me.

Three days into his stupid space and I’ve had enough. At night, after my parents go to bed, he and Evan sneak outside to drink beer and smoke pot. Tonight, I’m going to join in and reclaim my best friend. Evan can go suck a bag of dicks.

Neb whines when I crawl out of bed and throw on some clothes. Our house isn’t big like my grandparents’ or Uncle Reed’s, but it’s bigger than it

used to be. A few years after I was born, when my parents were pregnant again with the first baby that later died, he and my uncles added another bathroom and two more bedrooms to the house. One for me and one for the baby. The other room remained empty and now stupid Evan lives there.

"Stay here," I tell Neb.

He lays his head down, clearly fine with not having to go outside in the cold. I grab my coat and slip out the front door. Beyond Dad's truck, in the woods, I see the fire. I hear their laughter and jealousy spikes through me.

My best friend.

Stalking them, I listen in on their conversation as I get nearer. Evan is telling some stupid story about his friend Rex and Rowdy is howling with laughter. They're both wasted. I can smell the pot from here. If it wouldn't keep me from seeing Rowdy again, I'd pull my knife out and stab Evan right in his stupid mouth that keeps spewing more annoying things.

I'm about to storm into their camp and yell at Evan when I stop dead in my tracks.

Their laughter has stopped. Evan leans forward, cups Rowdy's jaw, and kisses him. Freaking kisses him. I'm so stunned, all I can do is stare.

Why are they kissing?

I know why Evan is kissing Rowdy, but why is Rowdy kissing him back? All he ever talks about is one day getting a wife. Having a family. I thought maybe that's why he wanted to get out of the wilderness. So he could have sex for the first time. But now he's kissing Evan. Gross, annoying, miserable, fuckup Evan.

And he doesn't seem to be hating it.

Rowdy makes a guttural groan that sends heat burning through my veins straight to my dick. I'm shocked and nearly let out a squeak of surprise. I stare, transfixed on the scene before me, until Evan starts to fondle Rowdy over his jeans.

He lets him!

I let out a pained sound before turning on my heel and running as fast as I can.

"Wild!"

Rowdy calls out for me, but I don't stop. I run and run and run. Confusing emotions war inside me. I want to beat up Rowdy. Punish him for making me see that. I also want to hug him to me and make him kiss me instead. Rowdy's not Evan's. He's mine. My best friend. Mine.

By the time I make it to the house, I have hot tears streaking down my face. If only Momma could see. She says I'm emotionless sometimes. Her eyes grow sad when she says it, but I simply shrug.

I feel emotions.

Anger. Rage. Restlessness.

Now I feel pain.

Hot and explosive inside me.

Bomb after bomb detonating within me.

I don't understand it.

All I know is hate bubbles to the surface. I harness and ride it like I'm a surfer in the Pacific. I own that wave of hatred. It roars inside my ears, drowning out the sadness.

"Wild!"

I whirl around and look at Rowdy. He staggers slightly and his face is screwed up in some twisted way I've never seen on him before. My chest heaves as I wait for him to tell me it was a mistake. That it was because he was drunk. That it was stupid. That tomorrow we'll play football in the yard and he can tell me stories about his siblings.

Tomorrow will be better.

I just need to hear him say it.

"Wild…" His bottom lip trembles. "Please…"

I glower at him. "Out with it." Tell me you're sorry. That you're my best friend. Mine.

He swipes away a tear. "Please don't tell Uncle Atticus."

My breath is sucked right from my chest. "What?"

"I…I don't want Dad to know. I just…give me this. I need this." He glances over his shoulder and then turns back to look at me, a smile on his face that hits me right in the gut. "I need him."

Not me.

Him.

Evan.

"Hey," he murmurs. "It's just…I've been stuck out there. I'm finally free. There's a whole world out there I want to experience—the great unknown—and I feel like I'm finding that start. Just give me this. Please."

"Your secret is safe with me," I say in a cold tone. "That's what best friends do."

He gives me a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah, Wild. Best friends.”

Liar.

I see the lie in his eyes.

I’m nothing to him.

The truth is cold and painful and sickening.

Anger coats my heart like thick ice, hardening it to the point I’m numb.

“Your boyfriend’s waiting.” I shoot Evan a nasty glare, then turn back to storm into the house.

I climb into my bed and bury my face in the pillow. Dread and hate and despair war within me. I don’t know what to do about it. Momma says I’m emotionless. Maybe I’m too full of emotion.

Rather than sobbing like I want to, I suck in a breath and let it go slowly.

I won’t feel.

I will turn it off.

He thinks I’m nothing.

Then I’ll be fucking nothing.

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CHAPTER ONE

rowdy

The Present

Winter in Alaska is my favorite time of the year. Always has been. I remember being old enough to follow my dad around and would happily trudge through the snow, never letting the nip of the air bother me even in the least. I've spent many nights sleeping outside, huddled close to a campfire, in blizzard-like conditions just because I could.

That's the thing with the wild outdoors.

You can do a lot because there's no one there to stop you. The creatures don't care. The chilly air doesn't care. There aren't any people outside of family to care either.

The wilderness has no rules or parameters of behavior. Out here, you can be whomever you want to be.

At one time, though, I ran from it.

I wanted structure, normalcy, other humans. I wanted to see what the world truly was about. Reading about it in books just didn't satisfy the craving in me. I wanted more.

I got it and then some.

Too much.

So much more that it nearly killed me.

As the wind whistles outside my old cabin, I relax each one of my muscles. Despite the horrible things I went through while seeking out "more," I eventually made my way back home.

My family is all I need.

Then why do you insist on staying in this cabin so far removed from them, family man?

Ignoring the nagging voice inside my head, I scan the interior of my cabin. Long ago, it was the first home my parents built. It was here that they raised me to be the man I am today. Years later, they moved up to the clifftop and built a massive home there. I stayed with them until I left for town.

A shiver that has nothing to do with the winter winds blasting outside courses through me. I came back home—lost, beaten down, and emotionally drained. It's taken that long to sort out my mind and what all happened out there. And when I thought I'd finally gotten through most of the mental torture, our family was horribly attacked.

Spirit, my smart and beautiful young wolf, lifts her head and stares at me with her deep, knowing eyes. Unlike her stinky brother, Mage, Spirit is in tune with me. She senses when my moods shift and protects me from any predator that even looks my way.

"I'm fine," I grunt in assurance. "Just feeling amped up today."

She cocks her head to the side and then lets out a huff. It's almost as if she knows why I'm amped up.

Wild.

At some point today, Wild will roll onto our property, his massive shoulders squared and itching for a fight. It's been like this ever since I went to stay with him and his family. He caught me kissing his cousin, Evan, right after I got there and has apparently hated me ever since.

If only he knew that his hate for me over something so trivial is the least of my worries. People like Wild Knox are sheltered from true horror. He gets to go through life completely unaware of the disgusting things happening in our world.

Sometimes I wonder if I should confide in Wild about Evan. Would he believe me? Would he be pissed on my behalf? Or would this give Wild more fuel to hate me? As much as I'd like to say I don't care, that's a lie. Wild was my friend—a childhood playmate—until my thing with Evan stole it all away.

Spirit whimpers and her tail thumps softly on the wood floor near my booted feet.

"I really am fine," I mutter, squatting to give her a scratch behind the ears. "I need to stop stalling and go up to the big house. Get it over with, you know?"

Spirit lets out a little woofing sound of agreement. She knows the big house means lots of dropped pieces of food from my younger siblings. Plus, she'll get to see Destiny.

Thoughts of my little sister make my chest ache. It's a never-ending ache that burns hot, making my ribs feel as if they're on fire. I find myself caught between boiling with anger and hatred for the man who hurt her and completely gutted over the pain she keeps bottled up inside of her.

I want to help her, but I don't know how.

"Come on, Spirit," I say as I stand to fetch my coat and gloves. "Dez needs us."

My wolf launches to her feet at the mention of her favorite person and then trots over to the door to wait. I bundle up and shove my .45 in my coat pocket for easy access. Once we're ready, I open the door to the cabin. Spirit shoots out like a rocket into the white, wintery storm, disappearing in an instant. I close the door behind me, then trudge after her.

The biting sting on my face is refreshing. Something about the cold causes all my senses to come alive. I feel as though I'm part wolf in these moments, darting through the snowy, treacherous terrain with practiced ease. I'm deadly with my weapon and can track anything when I'm in this state of being.

Outdoors, I come alive.

Pain, memories, guilt—it all sheds from me like a second skin and I run from it all, instead soaking up everything about the stunning wilderness that brings me true joy.

Ahead, I can hear sounds of my wolf shuffling through the mounds of snow piling up everywhere. She knows the way to the big house and could get there blind if she needed to.

Unlike Destiny.

At one time, I thought my sister would overcome her disability and thrive out here. She was so sweet and filled with life. But when Jace and his crew took her and did what they did to her, they drained that life from her. Now it's like she can't do anything without someone's help. It's devastating to watch.

And yet you keep signing up for it.

A bird caws from nearby, startling me. I quickly scan the wintery scene to look for predators. When I find none, I continue down my path, thoughts drifting back to Destiny.

I was a recluse once, but ever since my family's lives were turned upside down after the attack, I've kept a closer eye on them. Especially Dez.

When we reach the stairs that lead up the cliffside to the big house, Spirit launches herself up effortlessly, not slipping once. She reminds me of a mountain lion as she makes her way up. Since I'm a mere human, I take my steps more carefully, making sure to hold on to the railing as I climb. By the time I reach the top successfully without falling, I'm panting from exertion.

I get a whiff of smoke and can see it drifting from my siblings' cabin. Ronan, Ryder, and Raegan all share the newly built cabin with their son Cayden. Their relationship nearly broke apart our family, but in the end, the three of them are still happily together. Because their relationship is not normal, Mom and Dad have requested they keep it sequestered to their own home so the younger kids don't ask questions.

Sometimes, I want to discuss it with Destiny. I wonder if she knows about them or is completely oblivious. Since she rarely speaks and stays in her self-made shell, it's hard to know what she's thinking and what all she understands about her surroundings.

She's not stupid by any means, but she's traumatized and struggles deeply.

Spirit stops under the walkway bridge that joins my siblings' yard with the big house yard. A gate in my siblings' yard allows access to the steps for the recently constructed wooden bridge for whenever we need to get to my parents' a lot easier and quicker. However, today I'm not eager to get there any quicker, so we opt for the long way around.

Spirit, unbothered by my choice to keep walking rather than using the bridge, trots ahead, once again getting lost in the wintery scene before me. I lick my bottom lip that burns from the cold air. A crack is forming right in the middle and of course I can't stop messing with it with the tip of my tongue, a nervous habit that started after the Evan drama.

When we reach the corner, I see a shiny red truck with a covered trailer hooked up behind it. Though it's turned off, the engine still clicks and makes sounds as though it was just running. The windows have been cleaned but now that the vehicle is off, snowflakes begin to layer on the windshield.

Time to face Wild.

Gritting my teeth, I continue my trek and turn another corner. The gate to the big house stands open. Spirit runs ahead and then I hear the happy yipping of her brother, Mage. Once I step through the gate, I see the orangey-red glow from the firepit where two figures stand, warming their hands.

"Son," Dad greets, giving me a nod. "Perfect timing."

I don't know about perfect.

Wild, sensing my approach, stiffens. Then he turns his head my way. His eyes flicker with animosity. It makes my gut clench every damn time.

"Hey, Dad," I grunt out. "Wild."

Wild gives me one of his chin lifts that somehow never fails to agitate me.

"Ready to get the trailer unloaded?" I ask Dad, steering my gaze from Wild to my father.

"In a bit," he says. "After lunch." His features tighten. "You better get in there. Dez is having a bad day."

All worries over having to deal with Wild evaporate as dread consumes me. Destiny's bad days are so damn sad.

"Got it. Holler when you need help."

With those words, I give them both a nod and start for the big house. Luckily, not all of it was destroyed when those bad people set it on fire and we were able to rebuild. It still hurts, though, knowing my family almost didn't make it out alive that night. Seeing the newer version of the old big house is a constant reminder of that horrific time in our lives.

Once I make it into the house, the smell of something savory and delicious assaults me. I kick off my snowy boots and then shed my coat and gloves. As much as I want to go investigate what Mom's cooking, I instead fish out the .45 from my coat pocket to set on the mantel, away from the kids, and head toward Destiny's room.

The door to her bedroom, directly across from Mom and Dad's room, stands ajar. I peek in to find Destiny standing by Renna's crib, her small hands clutching the wooden frame as she leans in as if to listen to our baby sister's breathing as she sleeps.

Every time I see Destiny, it's a kick to the stomach. She never smiles or hardly ever breaks the catatonic state she mostly stays in. But when she does, the emotion written all over her small features is painful to look at.

Dez is having a bad day.

Dad’s words replay in the back of my mind. At first glance, you’d think she was fine. But upon closer inspection, the signs are clear.

Unwashed hair.

Tense shoulders.

Wobbling bottom lip.

When she senses my presence, she whips her head my way. I clear my throat to give her an indication that it’s me before approaching. Her dainty features are red and her cheeks are tearstained. Murky blue eyes search wildly, never really settling on anything.

How terrifying it must be for her to be unable to see clearly. Mom thinks her vision is worsening, but since Destiny is nearly impossible to converse with, she’s not exactly sure.

I am, however.

In the past, she could make out shapes and forms. But recently, it’s as though she’s unable to see those either. She seems so lost.

I slowly prowl over to her, the urgent need to comfort her overwhelming me. Of all her siblings, I’m the one she lets in, even if only a little bit.

“Hey, Dez,” I murmur, careful to keep my voice low so as not to wake Renna.

Her frantic eye darting slows and she drops her unseeing gaze to the floor between us. One of her hands continues to hold tightly to the crib.

“Want to talk about it?” I ask, though I know she won’t.

She’s quiet for a beat and then gives the tiniest nod. My heart rate quickens. If she’s willing to talk, I’m more than willing to listen.

“Not here,” she whispers so softly I almost don’t hear.

Nodding, though she can’t see, I reach forward to take her free hand. She flinches at my touch but doesn’t pull away. My massive hand encircles her frail wrist, and it reminds me of just how small and precious she is.

Jace hurt this sweet girl.

Destroyed her.

If he wasn’t dead already by my own hand, I’d make it my life’s mission to hunt him down again, this time prolonging his suffering before landing the killing blow.

In my parents’ house, there are only a few quiet places. The living room is certainly not the place. I can hear other voices joining in the chaos too.

“This way,” I say to her, tugging her toward my parents’ room.

Once inside, I close the door behind us and lead her over to the foot of their made bed. I help her to sit and then ease down beside her as though I might shatter her from jostling her. When I realize I'm still grasping onto her wrist, I release her and then rub my palms up and down my cold jeans.

"Talk to me, Destiny."

She tugs at a string on the cuff of her long-sleeved shirt before sighing heavily. "It still hurts."

The air thickens as awareness settles around us.

Jace.

She's talking about Jace.

I refuse to say his name.

"What does?" I ask, encouraging her to continue. "Memories?"

She shudders. "The loss."

Rather than speak, I wait for her to continue.

"It was just blood," she whispers, "but it was a baby. *My* baby."

Sickness roils in my gut. I remember, a couple of months after they were rescued, Dad brought Destiny to my cabin. She was so broken and distraught. Dad never told me what was wrong. Now it all makes sense.

"I'm sorry," I murmur back. "I'm so sorry, Dez."

She turns her head and buries it against my shoulder. A loud, ragged sob escapes her. My mind reels with a thousand questions, but I don't ask any of them. I simply wrap my arm around her and pull her to me, comforting her the best I can.

"Have you talked to Mom about this?"

She shudders and shakes her head. "N-No. She tries. I can't."

Pride surges through me that she'll at least talk to me about it.

"It wasn't the baby's fault," she chokes out, clinging to my sweatshirt. "It didn't know it was created from…"

Rape.

I tighten with familiar rage, but I don't let my emotions rule me. She needs me cool, calm, and collected. She literally needs a shoulder to cry on.

"Rae and Mom," she continues, whimpering, "they got to have their babies. I didn't. Mine could have been a source of joy after a nightmare, but it was taken from me just like so many other things."

Dipping my head down, I nuzzle her unwashed hair with my nose, inhaling her familiar scent. "You'll find joy again, stinky, I promise."

A small snort bursts out of her. Then, to my utter shock, she giggles. To confirm what I'm hearing, I pull back so I can take hold of her delicate face. When I tilt her head back, her pink, plump lips are pulled back in a smile I haven't seen in forever.

So damn beautiful.

The jarring thought, random and completely inappropriate, confuses me. I shove it way back in the recesses of my mind where memories of Evan and my near-death experience live. Whatever possessed me to think my little sister's smile was beautiful is something that can never ever see the light of day.

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CHAPTER TWO

rowdy

Dinner with this family is always a dramatic affair.

"I'm gonna get Dad's belt!" Raegan threatens for the millionth time, causing both Ronan and Ryder to snigger beside her.

Dakota, unbothered by his older sister, continues to flick green beans at her from across the table. When one lands in her hair, her face turns deep red, and if not for having her hands full, she'd already be out of that chair. Before she can ditch the baby she's feeding in her arms to make good on her promise, Dad clears his throat in warning.

"Sorry," Dakota quickly says, grinning at Raegan. "I thought the baby was hungry."

The baby—little Cayden—swats his miniature hand in the air as if to reach for the green bean despite his mother already feeding him a bottle.

"I'm hungry," Wild says, opening his big mouth. "Can you flick one this far?"

Dakota, happy to find someone else to play with, starts to toss a green bean his way when Dad ends the whole thing with a firm stare.

Mom, clearly relieved that Dad has put a stop to it, directs Wild's playfulness to actual adult conversation. "How're your parents and the twins?"

Wild shrugs. "Fine. Mom hates college."

Curious, I lean in, ignoring the quiet bickering that's resumed between Dakota and Raegan.

"Why does she hate college?" Mom implores. "Your dad went. He played football just like you. Eventually made good money playing pro. There's a lot of opportunity for you."

When I stayed with Evan all those years ago, I quickly learned all about football. Regular people who live in regular towns seem to love it. They watch it on television for like half the year. Honestly, I thought it was kind of boring. For someone as hyperactive and impulsive as Wild, I'm not sure how he's even interested in such a sport.

"She just hates that I'm gone for months without visiting," Wild says with a shrug. "I'm surprised she let me leave the house to come out here with the supplies since my winter break isn't that long."

"She just misses you," Mom says, smiling. "It was hard when Rowdy left us."

I grimace at her words. Not a day goes by when I don't think about all the mental anguish and heartache that came after.

Wild glances over at me, and for a fleeting moment, he doesn't glower at me. Genuine confusion plays at his features, pinching his eyebrows together. I'm unable to mask the sickness roiling in my gut, nor can I hide the shudder that overtakes me. It's as though for a second in time, Wild sees past his anger and hurt, homing in on all the pain I've been living with.

Mom thankfully asks him another question, drawing his attention back to her. I glance down at the venison on my plate and begin cutting it with vigor, eager to focus on anything except the subject of Evan. Destiny, who's been quietly sitting beside me this whole time, leans close to me. She reaches over, her hand bumping the edge of the table, and then finds my forearm. With just a tiny squeeze, she offers me some comfort I crave.

The small touch grounds me and reroutes my mind. No longer am I pushing at the door that's threatening to open where the monster awaits. Instead, I'm back to thinking about our private conversation earlier.

Destiny is dealing with her own monsters. I'd much rather help her fight those than my own.

We didn't get to talk anymore about Jace and the miscarriage because Dad being ready to unload Wild's trailer interrupted us. To my surprise, Destiny took the opportunity to grab a much-needed shower.

That's progress.

Dad said she was having a bad day, but I think I helped make it better somehow.

After wolfing down some meat to keep the shaking at bay, I lean toward Destiny to gain access to her ear.

“You good? Earlier was, uh, deep,” I mutter low enough that only she hears.

She tucks a damp, blond strand of hair behind her ear and nods. “Cried some more in the shower, but I feel better now.”

My chest expands with happiness. “Good.”

“The question is, are *you* good? You had a moment there for a second.”

Destiny turns her head to look up at me even though she can’t really see me. Despite being nearly completely blind, I feel like she can see something others can’t. What Wild may have glimpsed a moment ago is nothing compared to how I feel Destiny is seeing me.

I told Ryder about what happened with Evan. Could I ever confide in Destiny?

Yes.

I know I could.

Hell, maybe it’d make her feel better knowing I also dealt with…that.

Rape.

I want to scoff at the thought. It’s not like it was with Logan and Ronan. Logan beat and bound my brother. He forcefully took what he wanted. Same as Jace with Destiny. Neither of them wanted it. Not even a little bit.

But me and Evan?

We were loaded. Things were blurred. I didn’t tell him no in the moment.

It was rape.

A full-bodied shudder ripples through me despite the toasty inside of my parents’ home. I may as well be outside in the blizzard-like conditions. Bone-deep cold makes my muscles ache and my soul threatens to freeze.

If it was rape and I was under the influence, why did I allow it to keep happening? At what point did I go from saying no to actively participating? At what point did I sort of like it?

The confusion and guilt and anger are a fierce storm raging inside me. Those horrible feelings and disgusting memories never leave me. No matter how much I turn it over inside my mind, I can’t seem to find peace with the fact that it’s over and I’m safe. No one is forcing me to do anything. Never again.

I’m overwhelmed with the need to escape. Back then, when I was a prisoner to the stupid drugs and Evan’s mind games, I felt so damn trapped.

He no longer has a hold over me.

“Excuse me,” I blurt out, my chair scraping over the hardwoods as I shove away from the table. “Need air.”

Without waiting for anyone’s approval, I stalk out of the dining room and into the living room where my coat is hung up. I quickly snatch it, throw it on, and slip out the front door. Icy wind prickles against my face as I work to zip up my coat. My entire body is shaking but not from the cold.

It’s coming from the inside out.

I hate that I can never shed that part of me. It’s always there, haunting and reminding.

Must be how Destiny feels.

I almost wish she’d follow me out here so I could confess to her.

She never comes, though.

The door opens behind me and then it shuts, followed by heavy footsteps. Too big to be Dez. I expect Dad or Ryder. Surely not Wild.

“Hey,” he says with a grunt as he pulls his beanie down over his forehead nearly to his eyes. “Your mom is currently freaking out in there.”

I cringe. “Why?”

“She and your dad exchanged a knowing look. I thought she was gonna cry. Figured I might as well help her out and come see what your problem is.”

I stiffen at his words. “Don’t have a problem.”

“Right.” He snorts out a laugh. “You just ran off in the middle of a bomb-ass dinner for no reason.”

I don’t even know what bomb-ass means.

“Just have some stuff on my mind,” I grunt out, irritated to be speaking to him about this. “What’s it to you?”

Snow pelts us, hitching a ride on the violent winds, reaching us under the overhang on the porch. It’d be smart to go inside so we don’t die of hypothermia, but I honestly don’t care about physical survival right now. The game is all mental from where I stand.

Surviving in the wild has been a part of my entire identity. Surviving my mind, though, is the real unknown wilderness.

I’m yanked from my thoughts when Wild grabs me painfully by the bicep and jerks me to face him. I start to shake him off, but then both of his hands grasp onto my shoulders, firmly holding me in place. In a fight, I know I could take Wild because I’m about the same size as him and about

as untamed as one can get. He plays football and weight trains, though, so it won't be easy.

When I see his face—filled with unhidden concern rather than hatred—all tension floods out of me.

"Why do you hate me so much?" I demand, unable to keep the words from tumbling out of my mouth.

His eyes widen and his lips part as if in utter confusion. "What?"

I square my shoulders despite his unrelenting hold. "You. Hate. Me. We can barely be in the same room together, Wild. This is probably the most we've spoken directly to each other in years."

Sure, we went on a mission together with Ryder to rescue our siblings, but we did a lot of speaking through Ryder. If we did speak, it was to snap at one another.

"I hate you?" Wild says, pure astonishment in his tone. "You're serious right now, man?"

Gritting my teeth, I give him a clipped nod. "Don't you?"

He shoves me back and then stalks down the porch steps, only slipping a little. Once he's out in the powerful blast of the winter storm, he lets out a roar of frustration. Irritation chases off all my twisted thoughts and I trudge after him.

I pull the hood of my coat on over my head to somewhat protect me from the elements. My cheeks and nose are already burning from the icy cold.

"Don't you?" I challenge again, the anger in my voice warming me slightly. "Answer me."

Wild, quick as a mountain lion, pounces at me. He grabs the front of my coat so we're face-to-face. His features are twisted into something vicious and damn near cruel, but his eyes are watering.

From the cold?

Because of me?

"I fucking loved you," Wild spits out. "And you went for him instead."

The way he says *him*, like it's bitter and vile on his tongue, actually soothes a broken part of my soul.

"I was your best friend," Wild continues, voice shaky. "Me. Not Evan. Me."

I'm stunned by the realness in his tone. His usual arrogant smirk is missing. Unmasked heartache is painted over his pinched features.

“Some best friend,” I grumble. “You gave up on me.”

“Because you kissed him!” he roars, warm spittle landing on my face. “Why him? Why?”

The storm whips around us, but neither of us moves. Finally, I croak out a response. “I don’t know. It was a mistake. He was the worst mistake of my life.”

Silence fills the air between us as he processes my words. Then he releases my coat and crosses his arms over his chest.

“I had these big plans for us,” he mutters. “My best friend was coming to stay with *me* for once. I was going to show you how the real world lives. We were going to have so much fun. But…” He looks toward the house, the yellow glow through the windows highlighting his face. “You chose Evan to be your best friend. Not me.”

Guilt tugs at my heart and I drop my gaze to the ground. “I did you wrong.”

“You think?”

Ignoring his jab that I now know stems from his own pain, I continue. “I saw Evan as older—more exciting. I did choose him and it was a mistake.” Swallowing down the emotion clogging my throat, I say, “I could have stayed young and innocent. Instead, I was forced to grow up and see the ugly things in this world.”

“What happened?” Wild demands. “What happened with the two of you?”

What a loaded question.

I decide to give him something, even if it’s not the full truth. “He broke me.”

Wild tenses but doesn’t say anything.

“He broke me and I don’t know that I’ll ever come back from it.”

“Well, you broke me too, Rowdy.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” I let out a ragged sigh. “Can we go back to being friends again? I’m so damn tired, Wild. So tired.”

He watches me for a beat and then gives me a small nod. “Under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You tell me everything one day. All of it. That’s what friends do. They confide in one another.”

I consider his words and imagine a time when I tell him all the things I once told my younger brother Ryder. It's hard to think of telling Wild of all people about what Evan—his freaking cousin—did to me, but maybe this is what'll eventually need to happen for me to fully put it to rest.

The idea of finally closing the lid on all that pain is an enticing offer.

"Yeah," I agree with a grunt. "Deal."

Before I can finish speaking, he attacks me with a bear hug. The guy has a powerful grip and nearly crushes my ribs in the process. And then, the asshole pushes me into the snow. His laughter, young, carefree, and so him, pierces the storm and reminds me of happy days when I was just a kid.

We can fix our friendship.

I throw a handful of snow at his face.

Right after a much-needed snowball fight where I kick his ass and remind him who's bigger, smarter, and older.

"This is war, Rowdy!"

Our laughter, though, says we've finally found our peace.

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CHAPTER THREE

rowdy

I can't feel my fingers because they're damn near frozen solid, but that doesn't stop me from lobbing another snowball, this one at Dakota. His screech makes me and Declan, my little partner in crime who's riding on my back, crack up laughing.

At some point during Wild's and my snowball fight, several others joined in on the fun after dinner. The storm is worsening, but my family doesn't seem the least bit bothered by it. We don't stop until Dad hollers for everyone to come back inside.

"It's getting too bad out here," Dad says, squinting against the icy wind. "Why don't you grab the other guest cabin, Rowdy. It won't be safe getting down the mountain with the weather acting like this. It's stocked with firewood and supplies."

Normally, I'd be eager to escape and get back to my quiet, lonely cabin, but tonight I don't have the energy. Plus, I don't want to do that to Spirit, who's no doubt inside, getting spoiled with cuddles by Dez.

"Yeah, okay."

Declan whines when Dad plucks him off my back. As much as I love that little kid, I'm looking forward to my solitude.

"Spirit can sleep with you, Deck," I assure him with a wave. "Quit your whining."

I don't wait around for Wild and head for Ryder's old cabin. Dad didn't just stock the place, but he also had the fatherly sense to go ahead and get a fire going. As soon as I open the cabin door, I'm met with delicious warmth.

Since my clothes are mostly wet from the snow, I quickly peel them off and hang them on wall hooks to dry. Once down to my boxers, I snatch a

blanket off the couch and toss it on the floor in front of the fireplace to use as a cushion. My toes prickle as warmth attempts to bring them back to life. To help in the effort, I stretch my long legs toward the crackling fire and wriggle my toes toward it.

As I chase away the chill that's taken hold of my bones, I stare at the flaming oranges, yellows, and reds. My mind drifts back to Destiny. She was so broken. Those horrible people broke my baby sister by kidnapping and raping her. And then, as if life wasn't cruel enough, it took the baby from her—the one thing that might've helped her heal from such torment.

A heavy ache forms in the center of my chest. I absently rub the bare skin between my pectoral muscles as though the action can ease the pain I feel for her.

It can't.

Like me, Destiny will carry her anguish with her for years to come. Hell, I'm still toting mine around like a backpack filled with rocks, and compared to her trauma, it's nothing.

She must be so tired of being crushed under the weight of it.

Tonight, though, I saw a spark of the sweet, special girl she once was. Peeking out from beneath those sad blue eyes that can barely see, a flicker of hope shone.

Her small kernel of hope gives me hope that one day everything won't hurt so bad. Maybe we can help each other out of the hellish pit we've been tossed into.

Creak.

I'm jolted from my thoughts first by the sound of the cabin door opening and then by the blast of chilly air rushing in after.

"I brought us some fun," Wild announces as he kicks the door shut behind him, two bottles of some sort of liquor in each hand. "Choose your poison. Tequila or vodka?"

I snatch the bottle closest to me—tequila—and unscrew the cap. Returning my gaze to the fire, I swallow back a couple of burning gulps. For a moment, my brain goes blissfully fuzzy. The heat of the alcohol eliminates any lingering chill from earlier.

This is nice.

Wild drops another folded blanket onto the floor beside me. I cut my gaze over to him, surprised to find he's also stripped down to his underwear. Where mine are worn out, faded, and a little loose from the failing elastic,

his are damn near painted on his athletic body. Because I can't help but look, I notice his impressive bulge. A hint of interest curls in my gut, wondering just how big he gets when hard.

Shame floods over me, prickling over my skin like drops of acid. I quickly turn my attention back to my bottle and take another long pull.

Do not go there, Rowdy.

Not with Wild. Not with anyone.

Though I try not to think about it, I'm reminded of the many times with Evan that sex felt good—really good. And even though I originally didn't want it, I grew to accept it. To actually enjoy it. To fucking crave it.

Despite my best efforts not to think about this stuff, my cock throbs, filling with blood because of my arousing thoughts. Before I can stop it, my dick becomes fully hard, and I'm awkwardly trying to hide it with the damn tequila bottle.

Thankfully, Wild is too busy trying to get warm and chugging at his own drink. I once again dart my gaze over at him, noticing the sharp line of his jaw, the bobbing of his Adam's apple as he swallows. The urge to lick the side of his neck becomes so strong I nearly groan.

Stop it.

I close my eyes and he disappears. As soon as the distraction of my friend is gone, my thoughts are back on things that hurt.

The pain is a relief in this moment.

I force myself to think of Destiny's haunted gaze, her pouty bottom lip, the slight quiver of her chin. It's so damn sad my heart lurches in my chest. At least thinking about what she's going through is a boner killer. I can feel my cock calming down, which in turn makes my heart rate slow back down.

No matter how good Wild looks next to me, I won't ever go there with him. We've only just aired our dirty laundry and are finally on amicable speaking terms. I'll be damned if I ruin the chance for a do-over because I'm lusting over his perfectly chiseled body.

I stifle a groan.

Again with thinking about his dick.

"Is it too soon for us to hang?" Wild asks, voice husky and unsure.

His words are a bucket of icy river water being poured over my head. "W-What? No, man. It's fine. My head's just a mess."

Tension bleeds from him and he relaxes, taking another hearty chug from his bottle. "This vodka tastes like ass."

We both chuckle because all liquor in my opinion tastes like ass. But it makes you feel good, which is the trade-off.

“Dating anyone?” I ask, unable to look him in the eyes.

He snorts. “Nah. Me and this girl Freya broke up right before I came out here. Apparently, I was ‘faking’ liking her.”

“How do you fake liking someone?”

“Hell if I know. I texted her all the time and when we weren’t in class, we’d go out to eat and then go back to her place to have sex. She might’ve been faking her orgasms, but I never did. Kind of baffled me when she came at me with this, but to be honest, it’s kind of a relief.”

I lick my lips, tasting the lingering tequila there, and again try to hide my growing erection with the bottle. Why am I so horny tonight?

“You can do better,” I mutter.

“I guess.”

We both grow quiet, each of us stuck inside our own heads. I’ve managed to again quell the lust-filled thoughts and have fixated on a log in the fireplace that glows orange.

“That night,” Wild murmurs, voice unusually soft and young sounding. “I got my heart broken.”

Turning my head, I study him. “It didn’t sound like you were that into Freya.”

His nostrils flare and his gaze darts to my mouth for a brief second before returning to my eyes. “Not Freya, dipshit. That night when you and Evan kissed.”

I frown at his words and stupidly gape at him. “Why?”

He groans and tugs at the band holding his long locks in a bun. His messy hair falls from its hold and cascades to his shoulders and curls at the ends to touch his collarbone. My fingers twitch as I wonder how it would feel to run them through his silky hair.

I press the tequila bottle hard against my dick, hoping to cause a little pain to get it in check. It doesn’t work.

“I didn’t know until then, but I liked you, Rowdy.” He sighs heavily and shakes his head. “Fuck. This is embarrassing.”

“No,” I grunt. “Just spit it out. If we’re going to be friends again, we need to stop with the games.”

A shy smile quirks his lips on one side. “I wanted it to be me who got to kiss you. Not Evan. Me.”

Realization washes over me and all I can do is gape at him with my mouth open like a trout on the bank of the river. “What?”

He throws his head back and laughs. I marvel at his handsome features—long lashes, proud nose, full lips. I lick my own lips again, unable to control the heat burning deep in my gut.

“I was jealous,” Wild continues. “Evan got to have you and you were supposed to be mine.”

His claim over me makes me smile.

“Don’t get a big head about it,” Wild grumbles playfully. “I’m just telling you what my young teen self was thinking.”

“And now?”

He looks away and stalls by drinking more of his vodka. After a long swallow, he shrugs. “You’re not his. That’s all that matters to me.”

My mind reels with his words. Are we really discussing the fact that Wild has always wanted me as more than a friend? That he’s satisfied now because I’m not with Evan?

“I’m no one’s,” I mutter, liking the freedom of those words. Especially not Evan’s.

Wild stares unabashedly at me, his gaze stealthily sneaking its way down my nearly naked body. Like all those years ago with Evan, I get a thrill from the attention.

“If I do something crazy,” Wild murmurs, voice husky, “could we chalk it up to being drunk later if you hate it?”

My chest tightens at his words and tendrils of worry creep in. The stiffness of my cock flags a bit.

What kind of crazy?

I have flashbacks to Evan pushing the needle into my flesh. The biting sting and then the hot rush of ecstasy. And then our sweaty bodies, clawing hands, painful stretching between my ass cheeks.

“Hey,” Wild murmurs, plucking the bottle from my hand.

It’s then I realize my hand is trembling violently. I curl it into a fist and lie back on the warmed wooden floor. As I stare up at the ceiling, I attempt to calm the storm raging inside me. Having put his bottle aside too, Wild stretches out beside me, resting on one elbow. Tentatively, he covers my fisted hand that rests on my chest with his.

I can feel his intense stare on me, but I can’t meet his gaze. Would he be able to see the unmasked shame written all over me? Would he see how

weak I was with Evan?

“You okay?” Wild asks, his vodka breath tickling over my face. “You shut down.”

No.

I’m not okay.

I’ll never be okay.

My eyes prickle with tears, but I’ll never let them fall. I move my fisted hand, leaving his palm to rest on my chest. It’s a warm, tingly sensation and I certainly don’t hate it.

Wild’s eyes burn hot with need and it’s exhilarating. Knowing that this guy who’s seemingly hated me for years was actually just nursing a heartbreak does things for my ego. The powerlessness I’d felt moments ago dissipates as control grabs hold of me.

I’m not some victim like Evan made me.

I can make my own choices.

Reaching up, I touch a tendril of Wild’s soft hair. His nostrils flare and his eyes widen, but he says nothing. He makes no moves.

I’m safe.

Without considering the repercussions, I slide my palm to the back of his head, drawing him to me. When his lips are just inches from my mouth, he whispers beautiful words to me.

“Are you sure?”

The fact that he senses how not okay I am has relief flooding through me. Chasing the relief is desire.

I want to kiss him.

I draw him the rest of the way to me until his lips brush over mine. The first kiss I give him is almost sweet. Curious even. Then, as if he can’t take it anymore, he lets out a small growl before crashing his mouth to mine.

The sudden intrusion of his vodka-infused tongue has me gasping. I quickly retake control, tangling my fingers in his hair, drawing him back just enough to where I can lead how deep the kiss goes. He snarls in frustration but doesn’t fight me. His thumb brushes over my nipple and I moan at the sensation.

I bite at his bottom lip and then soothe away the sting by sucking it into my mouth. He lets out a sound of pure bliss and then resumes panting heavily. My tongue swipes over his again before I’m back to nipping at his lip. It must drive him crazy because he pinches my nipple this time.

The kiss is nice—fiery hot—but also…lacking. I can't put my finger on it. Maybe Evan broke me.

Or maybe you just aren't meant to do this with guys…

As Wild resumes control of the kiss, practically eating me alive while punishing my poor nipple, my mind drifts to the past. To a certain girl at one of the parties we had. She was a cute blonde with huge breasts. I'd been completely fucking enamored by them. Later, when in bed with Evan, I came so hard imagining my cock between them.

I'm snapped to the present as a hand slides into my boxers. My entire body turns to ice as I struggle to catch my breath. Wild squeezes my cock a couple of times as if he can pump life into it.

It remains limp.

How?

Moments ago, it was about to burst from its confines.

Humiliation covers me like a hot, wet blanket. I'm going to suffocate.

"Hey, breathe," Wild whispers, hand sliding back up my chest. "Rowdy, look at me."

My panicked eyes meet his. I'm met with kind, worried eyes, not cruel ones. And, if I'm being honest, maybe a little sadness glimmering in his gaze.

"Sorry," I croak out. "I, uh, I…"

"Nah, don't sweat it." Wild gently kisses my lips and lingers there as though he can freeze the moment. Finally, he reluctantly pulls away. "Like I said, we can chalk it up to being drunk. Everyone does stupid shit when they're drunk."

I exhale in relief, searching his eyes to see if there's any animosity.

No animosity.

Acceptance.

"I really, uh, just need a friend," I say, hating how awful that sounds. "Please."

Wild's stare bores into me for far too long. Eventually, he nods. "If that's the way I get to have you, that's the way I'll take you."

I want to hug him, but after our make-out session and failed hookup, I don't want to confuse him. Slowly, I nod in agreement.

"Well, I'm beat. Gonna head to bed now."

I grab his bicep. "You can stay over." My cheeks burn hot. "On the couch."

He chuckles. “We may be friends again, but I’m not about to beat off in front of you. A man’s gotta have some privacy for that shit.”

As he rises to his feet, I take note of his erection that obscenely tents his boxers. The head of his cock peeks out past the top of the waistband, glistening with pre-cum.

Guilt tugs at my heart but not enough to offer to relieve him of his problem.

Again, that would be confusing.

And I’m not confused.

I want Wild. As a friend. Nothing more.

He manages a murmured goodbye before throwing on clothes in record speed. As soon as the door thuds shut behind him, I pluck myself off the floor and then fall face first onto the bed.

Sometimes I miss Evan warming my bed at night. But then the reality of what kind of man he was always erases that longing. If I knew things wouldn’t get weird, I’d ask Wild to come back and get in bed with me. Being held by someone who loves you would soothe the soul.

But at what cost?

More confusion? More pain? More heartache?

The line in the sand has been drawn between me and Wild. There’ll be no crossing it again.

Exhaustion finally takes hold of me. Longing for some kind of comfort, I think back to dinner when Destiny’s hand touched my arm. That small gesture was soothing to my soul. I drift off to sleep with her rare smile on my mind.

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CHAPTER FOUR

rowdy

Stop.

The word stays stuck on my tongue and I manage to make a stupid sound with my lips instead.

Beneath the haze of my high, the sane part of me is screaming for me to put an end to all this. How? How do I get Evan to stop if I can't even form the word?

I become fixated on the bed sheet my cheek is pressed against. It's wet there. Am I crying?

It doesn't hurt.

At least not in this moment.

I may have gone completely out of my mind the second he injected that warm bliss into my vein, but I'm aware enough to know that it'll hurt when it wears off.

Maybe he'll give me more…

I hate that voice inside my head. The weak one. The one who gives up and allows Evan to do these things to me. Whenever I try to stifle that voice and stand my ground against Evan, he never fails to guilt me into giving in.

I hate him.

I hate myself.

A low whine crawls out of me. I sound like one of my younger siblings after a nightmare. Except no one's coming to rescue me from my bed. Dad isn't here to slay my monsters. I'm a willing captive to one.

"I fucking love you," Evan murmurs, kissing my neck with gentle adoration. "You were meant to take my cock, baby."

I shudder in disgust. Baby. Such a sweet term of endearment. Whenever he says it, it makes my skin crawl.

“Are you coming already?” He grunts, intensifying his thrusts against me. “Always so horny for me.”

I’m not coming.

I can’t feel my dick.

A burning-hot sting cuts through my drugged haze, though, where he penetrates me relentlessly.

Did he remember the lube this time?

Will I bleed again?

Unable to do much about my situation, I try to think of anything else besides Evan and our fucked-up relationship.

I want to go back home.

I miss Mom and Dad and my family.

My brain wants to notice how Evan nips at my flesh, his favorite way of marking me as his, but I force it back home.

The smell of pine on a chilly morning.

My younger siblings’ laughter.

Listening to one of Dad’s stories about the world outside of our safe home.

I’d give anything to rewind time and find myself at Mom’s dinner table, tossing rolls at Ryder.

The pressure that fills me is suddenly gone. Then I feel heat splash against my backside. Thank God that’s over. A groan escapes me when I’m physically rolled onto my back.

I close my eyes, disgusted by the man who thinks he loves me.

Love isn’t like this—cruel, selfish, nauseating.

This is something far more sinister.

“Oh, shit,” Evan grumbles. “I forgot the lube again. Hold on. I’ll fix it for you, baby.”

Baby.

Bile creeps up my throat.

He pulls my arm toward him and then begins setting up my next fix. I want to pull away, but I also look forward to another soothing hit. I don’t put up a fight whatsoever when he presses the needle into my flesh.

Glorious heat rushes into my body, chasing away every horrible thought or sensation.

And then his mouth is on my stomach. Kissing and sucking with such adoration. I let out a hiss of pleasure when that awful mouth takes my cock

into its wonderful wet warmth and he swallows me down, down, down.

“Dude, wake up. You’re freaking me the fuck out.”

I jolt with a start and scramble to a sitting position, my tired eyes searching the small space for him.

For Evan.

Eventually, my gaze lands on a fully dressed Wild, who wears a concerned expression. As soon as I realize I’m back home and not there with the monster of my past, I relax.

“Get dressed,” Wild instructs. “Your mom’s already started breakfast. You could use a walk before going in there.”

I shake away the lingering memory that wove itself in my dreams and quickly slide off the bed. It’s not awkward having Wild in the room while I dress, but it is uncomfortable knowing he got to see one of my nightmares.

He’s going to ask questions.

And, last night, upon making up with him, I promised him answers.

Unease twists my gut. The last thing I want to do is cause more friction between Wild and his cousin.

I throw on my clothes, boots, and coat before following Wild out of the cabin. He starts a trek through the freshly fallen snow along the perimeter of my parents’ fenced-in homestead. Down at the big house, I can hear subdued voices, which means everyone’s up. When I get a whiff of cooked meat, my stomach grumbles hungrily.

We’re quiet for most of our trek. It isn’t until we stop in front of the chicken pen that Wild speaks again.

“Want to talk about it?”

The dream or the past or everything?

Not really.

I don’t even have to answer. He knows I don’t want to.

A heavy sigh escapes him, clouding the air with a white puff. “Did Evan do something to you? Things just aren’t adding up. Something happened, didn’t it?”

I close my eyes and try not to shiver. “Yup.”

“Come on. Tell me.”

“It’s messed up, man,” I warn him. “It’s your cousin. I don’t want to speak badly of him.”

At this, Wild snorts. “I know exactly what kind of person Evan is. Tell me.”

“Promise you won’t kill him?”

Wild jerks his head my way, eyes narrowed. “No.”

I smirk at him. “I’m serious. I…I just don’t want to cause strife in your family. I need to know this secret stays between us.”

He grinds his teeth together and finally nods. “Fine. I won’t kill him. But as your best friend, I reserve the right to make his life a living hell just for the fun of it if I feel like it.”

The thought of Wild terrorizing Evan brings a smile to my face.

“Fine,” I agree. “I also don’t want you to think less of me. This is… humiliating.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Ryder. I told him when we were hunting those assholes down.”

“He never told me or indicated he knew.”

“Good.” I stare up at the cloudy sky and sigh. “Evan was exciting at first. You know that. I mean, you witnessed our kiss. It sparked something in me and I craved more of it.”

Wild’s upper lip curls slightly as though he can’t see how his cousin is that exciting. To me, back then, he was so damn cool.

“When he got his own place and I went with him, I really felt like I was living the life I was supposed to. I didn’t have to abide by anyone’s rules any longer. I was a real man who made his own decisions.”

Wild crosses his arms over his chest, jaw muscle ticking as he studies me. To his credit, he remains quiet, allowing me to get this out.

“It was great at first. Kisses turned into hand jobs and eventually blowjobs. It was pretty fun getting off with my new friend. We started partying, which made it all the more fun.”

“Hmph,” Wild mutters.

“It was good until Evan started, I don’t know, obsessing over me. He started controlling everything—who we invited, what we drank, when they all got kicked out. The weed-induced frotting sessions that were fucking

amazing to me weren't enough for him. He always wanted more." I clench my eyes shut for a moment. "He wanted me to bottom for him."

Wild's lips thin out, but he says nothing, so I continue.

"I told him no. Didn't seem like a good time to me." I stiffen as I think about what happened next. "Then we got drunk. He kept encouraging me to drink. We were having a blast. But I got blackout drunk, and when I woke up naked with him, a throbbing in my ass, I realized what had happened."

Wild's eyes flame with fury. "He fucking raped you?"

"Quiet," I hiss, jerking my head over my shoulder. "I don't want anyone to hear."

"I'm going to kill him," Wild growls.

"No," I snap back. "You promised. Do you want to hear what happened or not?"

He glowers at me for a beat and then nods. "Tell me the rest."

"Once we got past that first time, it happened after every party. I was even coherent through most of them. I'd sort of just given in at some point." I swallow and look down at the snow-covered ground. "But I got bored—of him, of the sex, of our lifestyle. I guess he could sense that. Started throwing bigger parties and with more girls. One girl I'd been attracted to gave me a blowjob. It was nice and I even considered what it might feel like to have sex with her. Maybe it was time for me to stop all the partying and find a girl to settle with."

"She sounds like a real winner," Wild deadpans.

"At least she didn't take what she wanted," I spit back. "She asked if I wanted a blowjob and then asked if she did a good job. It was refreshing, man."

Again, his nostrils flare with anger. "Why didn't you just leave?"

"Because I felt like a loser. I didn't want anyone to know I couldn't cut it in the real world."

"You weren't given a chance," Wild argues back. "Evan made sure of that."

"Anyway, messing with that girl was the catalyst for everything going truly wrong. Evan was pissed and we got into a huge fight. He was my best friend, so I wasn't about to hurt him, but…"

"He hurt you."

"Damn near broke my nose. The fight was so intense the cops were called. Luckily, your uncle Will came to the scene and kept things quiet."

“Luckily,” Wild says with sarcasm.

“Evan was crushed the next day when the alcohol wore off. He cried, man. He seemed genuinely sorry for how he’d behaved. I wanted to leave, but he begged me not to go.”

“It gets worse, doesn’t it?”

“Yup.” I let out another resigned sigh. “The parties got wilder after that. New crowd, new drugs, whole new world was introduced to me. They got me to try heroin and that pretty much sent me into a tailspin.”

“Heroin?” Wild’s eyebrows fly up in shock. “Seriously, Rowdy? That shit’s addictive as hell.”

“I know,” I growl, my eyes stinging with unshed tears. “I never felt more used than after getting high and fucked by someone I barely even liked.”

“How long did this go on?”

“Months. Our parties ceased. Just me and him all the time. Heroin and sex. Sex and heroin. And then one day, I…I don’t know. I just sort of woke up. I’d had enough and told him as much.”

“Went over smoothly?”

“He beat the shit out of me. I let him because deep down I felt like I deserved it for letting myself get put in the situation to begin with.”

“You sure I can’t kill him?”

I chuckle, but the sound is hollow.

“Continue,” he grumbles when I don’t give him the green light to murder his cousin.

“Anyway,” I say quickly, “after a good beatdown, he shot me up with heroin. A lot.”

“Wait, what?” Wild snaps. “He tried to kill you?”

“I don’t think so,” I state honestly. “I think he was just trying to get me back under his thumb. He knew he’d physically hurt me, so I also think he wanted to make that pain go away.”

“But he did too much?”

“Yup. Almost died that night. Went to the hospital and everything.”

He knows the rest. I basically got the hell out of there after that and came back home. Of course Wild and his family never saw the inner workings of Evan’s and my friendship or they’d have intervened.

A sound comes from the chicken coup inside the pen, making me and Wild both jerk our heads in that direction. Destiny emerges from the coup,

face red and tears streaming down her cheeks. Her expression is one of pure horror.

She heard it all.

She heard every damn detail.

I’m supposed to protect her and I unknowingly told my terrible story that will no doubt trigger what she went through.

Fuck.

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CHAPTER FIVE

rowdy

"Can you give us a minute?" I ask Wild, my entire body shuddering. "Please."

Wild gives me a quick, rib-crushing hug, then heads toward the big house. After a deep breath, I let myself into the pen and make my way to where Destiny stands with a basket of eggs in her gloved hand.

"You heard that," I mutter, shame creeping through me. "I'm sorry."

She tilts her head, looking in my general direction but not seeing me. "You're sorry? Rowdy, what happened…" She makes a choked sound. "How are you so normal after that?"

I bark out a laugh that sends a few chickens squawking away from me. "Normal? Dez, I can barely function most days." I glance past her into the coup. "Just you?"

"Dad brought me out here to gather some eggs for Mom. He said he'd be back for me in a bit."

I scan the yard and see Dad on the porch of the big house. Wild is talking to him. When he sees me, he waves before going back inside.

"Why are people so cruel?" she asks, sniffling. "Why?"

Using the back of my gloved hand, I swipe at her wet cheeks. It's too cold out here to be wet. "I don't know, but they are."

"I'm sorry," she whispers and then sighs. "Actually, I'm not. I hate it when Mom says that to me all the time." She reaches for me and gives me a hug. "I understand how you feel. It sucks."

Needing her comfort, I squeeze her to me, careful not to crush her. My eyes water, but I don't let the sadness form. "We're going to get through this. Just one day at a time, okay?"

She nods, letting out a small sob. This time, a tear does escape. "Okay."

I release her and quickly swipe at my leaking eye. Thankfully, she can't see. I'll need to make sure I'm put together before I head in for breakfast.

"Do you ever wonder if this is all life has to offer?" Destiny asks, her words guarded and cryptic. "Like what's the point?"

Though I've often personally wondered that, I don't like the idea of my sweet, younger sister thinking such terrible thoughts. A world without Destiny is a dark one—one I don't want to be a part of.

"Come on," I say with a grunt. "Get those eggs inside so we can get breakfast."

She nods and hands me the basket of eggs. "It was just a simple question, Rowdy."

"And I don't like the complicated answer."

I've been watching Destiny like a hawk ever since our run-in before breakfast at the chicken pen. The story she overheard sent her spiraling. I can see it in the absent way she pokes at her scrambled eggs, seems to have completely zoned out despite the loud group around her, and shivers every so often as though the memories are a real, tangible thing running its wicked finger down her spine.

And it's all my fault.

Why didn't I make sure me and Wild were completely alone first?

"I'm not feeling so well, Mom," Destiny blurts out in the middle of Raegan's story about Cayden's inability to sleep through the night. "May I be excused?"

Me and Wild exchange a knowing look. Mom presses her lips together and her eyebrows knit with worry. "Of course, honey."

Destiny, though being mostly blind, has the house memorized. She pushes back her chair before easily darting through the dining room and living room toward her bedroom. Spirit takes off after her, tail wagging happily. Mage can't be bothered to leave his spot right by Ryder's chair where he's been sneaking bits of meat.

I want to go after her and apologize again for triggering her, but I of all people also know that solitude is sometimes exactly what you need.

It's hard to sit and do nothing, though.

Mom tries her best to focus back on Raegan's story, but her heart's not in it. I can tell, like me, she wants to go after Destiny. We all want to help her but all feel so helpless to do so.

I'm distracted even as we finish up and Mom starts clearing the table. My thoughts are on Destiny's pain.

Maybe I should go talk to her.

I catch Wild's stare as I rise to my feet. He gives me an encouraging smile. It's crazy to think just yesterday we hated each other.

When I pass by Mom, I kiss the top of her head, then stride toward Destiny's room. I make it to the hallway when Spirit lets out a sharp bark. It's a sound she rarely makes and usually only when she's in distress. I bolt past Destiny's room and into my parents', where I find Spirit sitting outside the bathroom door.

"What is it, girl?" I ask as I come to a halt beside her. "Hey, Dez. You okay in there?"

She doesn't answer, which causes Spirit to bark again.

"Dez," I say, this time louder. "Open up."

Spirit cocks her head to the side. It's then I hear sniffling. I let out a guilty sigh. She's in there crying. I'm about to whistle for Spirit to come with me to give her some privacy when I hear another sound.

Something clatters to the ground.

And then, something heavy follows it.

Without thinking, I grab the door handle and twist it. Locked. Fisting my hand, I bang on the door. "Destiny, open the door."

Spirit growls and then claws at the floor in front of the door. Something's wrong. Knowing my parents keep a key to the door on top of the doorframe, I quickly snag it and work it into the lock. My hands are shaking too badly to get it open on the first try, but I finally manage to unlock it. When I push the door, something keeps it from opening all the way.

It's Destiny.

She's on the floor.

I push against her with the door until I can squeeze into the bathroom. I'm trying to make sense of what's happened and then I see it.

Dad’s razor on the floor beside her. A pool of blood forming beneath her limp hand.

No.

No, no, no, no!

A ragged cry rips out of me as I fall to my knees beside her in the small space in front of the door. Her skin is incredibly pale and now I can see it’s because she’s bleeding profusely from her wrist. I yank a hand towel off the counter and press it against her wound to try to stop the bleeding.

“Destiny,” I choke out. “What happened?”

She doesn’t answer with words. A small, soft moan trickles out. It sounds so pained. Fucking defeated. I burst into tears as it all connects.

The razor. The blood. Her trauma.

Someone tries to come through the bathroom door, but they slam against me instead. I grunt in pain but don’t let go of the pressure on her wound.

“Rowdy!” Dad bellows. “Let me in now, Son.”

I manage to pull Destiny’s back to my chest while keeping hold of her wrist and scoot over enough for Dad to squeeze in. As soon as he sees the state of my sister and the sheer panic on my face, he starts cursing.

“What happened?” he demands as he crouches over us. “What the hell happened?”

“She’s hurt,” I say, voice wobbling wildly. “Your razor. Dad, she’s hurt.”

Understanding washes over his features and he nearly turns as pale as Destiny. Then he bolts out of the bathroom.

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “I’m here. You’re going to be okay now. Dad’s going to fix it, I swear.”

She doesn’t respond. Her skin feels clammy and almost cold to the touch. The thought of losing her is almost too painful to bear. Blood soaks through the towel and I feel a rivulet run down my arm.

“This is all my fault,” I cry out. “Oh, God.”

Dad returns with a medical kit. Ronan squeezes into the space with him. All I can do is hold Destiny in my arms while sobbing as if I’m two years old. I didn’t even cry like this after everything Evan did to me.

This is worse.

Losing Destiny would be the end of me.

“Let go,” Dad commands, eyes meeting mine. “I need to look at it.”

“She’ll bleed out,” I hiss. “I have to stop the bleeding.”

Dad curses again and then he and Ronan switch places. Then my father is in my face, his lined, tanned face cracking with overwhelming sadness. He leans his forehead to mine. “Let go, bud.”

“I’m going to fix her,” Ronan assures us. “You can let go now.”

I realize I can trust them to take care of her. We all love Destiny more than words can describe. Once Ronan’s pulled her arm away from my grasp, I take my shaking, bloody hand to hold her to me.

Turning my head away from Dad, I bury my face in her hair and sob. “You’re going to get better,” I assure her. “I promise, Dez. You have my word.”

But it’s an empty promise.

Out here, in the wild, there are no guarantees.

I stare at the blood beneath my thumbnail. When I’d finally washed up last night, I did a piss-poor job. Her blood remains—a constant reminder of what happened yesterday.

Destiny tried to take her own life.

Bile burns my esophagus and I wonder if I’ll keep from puking again. I’ve been sick to my stomach going on two days now. I haven’t showered or eaten anything. The only thing I allowed was a few swallows of my tequila bottle that surprisingly stayed down.

Someone raps on the cabin door and I sit ramrod straight. “Yeah?”

“It’s me, Ro. She’s asking for you.”

My heart catches in my throat.

“Mom?”

“Destiny.”

I’m on my feet and snatching my coat before I can hardly process Mom’s words. Destiny’s been sleeping ever since the incident. The fact she’s awake and speaking is a miracle. I nearly tackle Ronan on the way out. He chuckles and closes the door for me.

On my sprint toward the big house, I see Ryder and Wild sitting by the firepit. They both wave to me, but I don't wave back. I burst into the house and nearly run over a couple of kids on my way to check on Dez.

Spirit barks out in greeting from beside Destiny on her bed. That wolf hasn't left her side since all of this. I didn't want to, but Mom made me get some rest. All I did was toss and turn when I tried.

Destiny, with her arm bandaged up, pets Spirit with her uninjured hand. She's staring up at the ceiling even though she can't see anything. A brick of empathy for her hits me forcefully. She really was dealt a shitty hand. The blindness, the rape, the miscarriage. How much more can a girl take?

"You look terrible," Mom says sadly. "Why don't you shower first, honey?"

"No." I stand over Destiny's bed, staring at her pitiful form. "I can shower later."

She stares at my ragged form before giving me a quick nod. "Sit with her. I need to check on Renna and the boys."

As soon as she's gone, I kneel beside Destiny's bed. Gently, I take her injured hand in mine and give it a small squeeze.

I want to demand answers. Mostly to ask her why. But I say nothing.

The seconds turn into minutes and finally she speaks.

"It wasn't because of you."

Pain cuts deep inside my chest. She says that, but this suicide attempt happened right after she overheard what happened to me. I'll never believe it.

"It. Wasn't. Because. Of. You." Her voice shakes with each clipped word. "Rowdy."

I find her staring my way, knowing she can't make out the twisted expression on my face. "You overheard—"

"It wasn't you," she whispers. "Everything hurts all the time. I just wanted it to go away. The timing was coincidental."

"It was not coincidental," I growl. "It wasn't even thirty minutes after."

"Rowdy—"

"What can I do to help you?"

Her features contort into an irritated scowl. Good. It's better for her to be pissed at being cut off than to be so sad she'd rather be dead.

"I'm leaving."

At this, I frown. “Like hell you are. You’re staying right here. Away from sharp objects. Where I can watch you every second of every day.”

She huffs. “Not…okay, that’s a fair deduction, but that’s not what I meant.”

“Explain.”

“I’m going to stay with Uncle Atticus and Aunt Eve for a while. When Wild goes back, I’m going with him. Mom thinks I’ll have better access to the help I need.”

“What?”

“Honestly,” she says with a shaky smile, “it’s the most hope I’ve had in a long time. It can’t hurt to try.”

I continue to gape at her. “But it’s not safe.”

We simultaneously grimace because we both now know what Evan did to me. She swallows hard and absently pats Spirit on the head. “It’s not safe out here either. At least, in town, maybe I can make some friends.”

A terrible feeling settles in my gut. I’d wanted to make friends too. Look where that got me.

“Mom and Dad are fine with this?”

“Mom wants to go with me.” She makes a face. “I told her absolutely not.”

Destiny, who’s always been the quiet rule follower of our family, told our mother no. It seems the rebellious streak runs strong in our bloodline.

“Someone has to go with you,” I grit out.

“Wild will keep me safe until I get there.”

But once she’s there, Wild will go back to college. Then who will watch over her? Uncle Atticus and Aunt Eve couldn’t keep me safe when I wasn’t much older than she is now. How can I trust them to do the same with her?

“I’m going too,” I blurt out and then nearly gag at the words.

“No,” she whispers. “You can’t. Not after—”

Indignation causes my blood to boil. “Don’t say it. I’m going. End of discussion.”

She tries to tug her hand out of mine, but I’m bigger and stronger. I tighten my grip.

“Why would you want to go back there?” she demands, her hand relaxing again. “What if you see…*him*?”

The thought of facing Evan makes me want to vomit.

Still, I have to do this.

“I’ll deal with that road when I get there. Keeping you safe is more important.”

“And who will keep you safe, huh?”

She stares straight into my soul. Sometimes I wonder if she can see more than she lets on. Just in case, I keep my features impassive despite the terror roiling in the pit of my stomach.

“I guess we’ll have to keep each other safe,” she says finally. I swear if she was physically able to, she’d put her hands on her hips with enough attitude it’d put Raegan to shame.

“Fine,” I agree, voice cool and unbothered, though it’s a farce.

She huffs, picking up on my deception. “Fine.”

Once the initial worry fades, excitement works its way into my veins. “You’ve never had milkshakes or listened to a live band or gone shopping.” A grin tugs at my lips. “This could actually be fun.”

Her lips curl into one of her sweet, rare smiles that light up the room. “Really?”

“Hell yeah.”

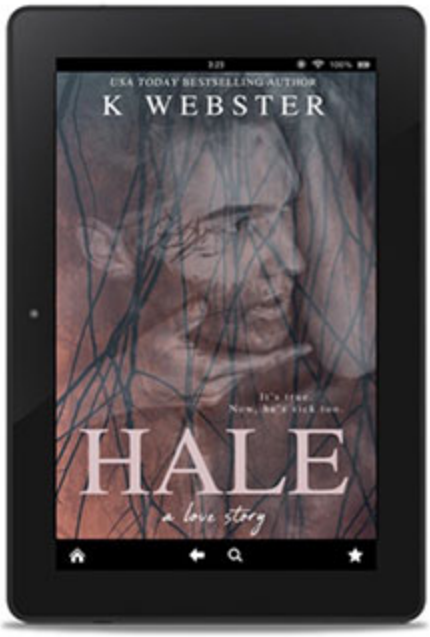
It’ll also be stressful, emotional, and just plain fucking hard having to deal with my painful past, but yeah, it’ll be fun too.

Looks like we’re in for a wild winter.

Rowdy’s story will continue…

Thanks again for reading this book! And, if you’re not on my newsletter, you should totally make sure you get on it so you never miss an update about my upcoming books! Check out my website if you want to read the other books in the Wild World!

Stay wild!
K Webster



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K Webster is a *USA Today* Bestselling author. Her titles have claimed many bestseller tags in numerous categories, are translated in multiple languages, and have been adapted into audiobooks. She lives in “Tornado Alley” with her husband, two children, and her baby dog named Blue. When she’s not writing, she’s reading, drinking copious amounts of coffee, and researching aliens.

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